



Harris, Kirsten. Walt Whitman and British Socialism: "The Love of Comrades" [review]

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Robertson, Michael. "Harris, Kirsten. Walt Whitman and British Socialism: "The Love of Comrades" [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (2016), 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2223>

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REVIEWS



KIRSTEN HARRIS. *Walt Whitman and British Socialism: "The Love of Comrades."* New York: Routledge, 2016. ix + 219 pp.

In the late 1880s, when he began visiting Walt Whitman daily and writing up their conversations, Horace Traubel also commenced a campaign to make the poet confess that he was a socialist at heart. Patiently, the young radical would watch for an opportunity to make a political thrust; inevitably, the canny old man would parry. "Do you have any sympathy for . . . socialism?" Traubel asked bluntly at one point. "Lots of it—lots—lots," Whitman replied. "Too much is made of property, here, now, in our noisy, bragging civilization—too little of men." Traubel persisted: "But about their political program—how about that?" "Of that I'm not so sure," Whitman told him. "I rather rebel. I am with them in the result—that's about all I can say." Expressions of general sympathy for people over property were the most Traubel was able to extract from Whitman; the young man acknowledged that as far as Whitman was concerned, "individualism deservedly carries the day."

Despite his profound and frequently expressed skepticism about socialist political activity, for roughly two decades, beginning in the 1880s, Walt Whitman was revered among British socialists. One of the most interesting questions in the history of Whitman's international reception is how a Free Soil Democrat became a patron saint of British socialism. Kirsten Harris's *Walt Whitman and British Socialism* is the first book-length response to that question. Employing deep scholarship and flexible, sensitive interpretations of literary and political discourse, Harris makes an important contribution to transnational Whitman studies.

Harris's lengthy introduction serves as a valuable primer on late-nineteenth-century British socialism. Henry Pierson's tripartite division of the socialism of this period into Marxist, Fabian, and "ethical" strands, laid out in two influential books published in the 1970s, has dominated understanding of the period. Drawing on recent

revisionist accounts, Harris rejects that neat division. She turns to Edward Carpenter's concept of the "larger socialism" as a useful way of understanding the diverse socialist movements of the era. Socialism overlapped not only with trade unions but with the women's rights movement and local cycling clubs; it drew in workers, artists, vegetarians, and spiritual seekers. Within the heady atmosphere of what socialist editor Robert Blatchford called the "new religion" of socialism, Whitman's politically vague but emotionally stirring appeals to fellowship made him particularly useful during this multi-faceted early phase. As Harris notes, "Able to accommodate overlapping and competing ideas, Whitman could speak powerfully to a movement . . . fiercely debating what it was and how it should develop" (8-9).

The book's first two chapters are on Edward Carpenter and the group of Whitmanites in Bolton, England, known as the Eagle Street College. Harris has dug deeply into the archives, and she offers novel perspectives on these now-familiar figures. Critical conceptions of the relationship of Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* to *Leaves of Grass* solidified almost from the moment of the first edition's publication in 1883, when Edward Aveling in an influential review proclaimed Carpenter to be the "English Walt Whitman." Aveling intended the label as a compliment, but a similar, widely publicized remark by Havelock Ellis was more critical: when a friend showed *Towards Democracy* to Ellis at a socialist political gathering in London, he handed it back with the dismissive comment, "Whitman and water." Ellis later recanted his hasty judgment, and many British socialists regarded *Towards Democracy* as a worthy companion-volume to *Leaves of Grass*.

By the time of Carpenter's death in 1929, his poetry had been largely forgotten. It was revived in the 1970s by critics interested in the history of homosexuality, Whitman scholars among them. Studies of Carpenter's reliance on Whitman to construct a positive model of homosexuality proliferated, but sophisticated formalist comparisons of *Towards Democracy* and *Leaves of Grass* did not appear until the publication of works by Andrew Elfenbein ("Whitman, Democracy, and the English Clerisy," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 2001) and M. Wynn Thomas (*Transatlantic Connections*, 2005). Harris builds on Thomas's analysis, but in place of his model of cultural transla-

tion, she relies on the Carpenterian metaphor of evolution. Carpenter, she argues, saw his adaptation of Whitman as temporal rather than geographic; he came *after* Whitman and thus brought the earlier poet's ideals closer to their inevitable realization. Harris perceptively identifies Carpenter's conception of a "Universal Self"—his version of the Emersonian Over-Soul—as the key to his thought and suggests that he regarded *Towards Democracy* not as "an English version of *Leaves of Grass* but [as] the latest literary contribution to the unfolding of the universal self" (46).

Carpenter's spiritually inflected versions of both socialism and Whitman's poetry were widely embraced in the 1880s and 1890s. The Bolton Whitmanites were among the most fervent adherents. Previous studies of the Eagle Street College have emphasized the group's homoeroticism (H. G. Cocks's *Nameless Offences*, 2009) and its construction of a male world of love and ritual (Michael Robertson's *Worshipping Walt*, 2008). Harris, drawing on Andrew Lawson's subtle analysis of Whitman's own class identity, focuses on the way that the men of the Eagle Street College used their lower-middle-class status to position Whitman as the foremost spokesman for a millennial socialism that had as its goal a transformative spiritual democracy.

William Clarke, a journalist and Fabian socialist, published his book *Walt Whitman* (1892) with Swan Sonnenschein, Edward Carpenter's publisher. The book is now virtually unknown, with good reason: Clarke used Whitman as a springboard to advance his own political and religious ideas. Harris's chapter on Clarke, the first extended discussion of the man and his book, forms a valuable part of her reception history. Equally valuable is her chapter on the uses made of Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Her discussion begins in puzzlement: why was a poem with particularly strong American nationalist overtones, written in response to the conclusion of the Civil War, so beloved by British socialists? Wolfgang Iser, one of the guiding spirits of Harris's study, noted that readers of texts "receive [the message] by composing it." She shows how British socialists composed a "Pioneers" that responded to their varying ideological and political needs.

Harris's broadest and most innovative chapter is her discussion

of how Whitman's poetry and the figure of the poet were employed within the socialist press. Jerome McGann has theorized that every text contains "variants of itself screaming to get out," and Harris argues that the ideological suppleness of a poet who claimed that he contained multitudes provided particularly productive variants for diverse socialist groupings. She finds four principal versions of Whitman within socialist periodicals: the poet of health, the revolutionary, the liberal-leaning reformer, and the prophet. The chapter is a model of deeply researched, thoughtful reception history, and it also contributes to recent scholarship on the periodical press, most notably by Elizabeth Miller in *Slow Print* (2013) and Mark Morrisson in *The Public Face of Modernism* (2001). Miller argues that radical journals attempted to construct an anticapitalist counterculture, while Morrisson details how socialists and anarchists used techniques of mass commercial culture for radical ends. Harris agrees that British socialists wanted to create an alternative public sphere, but she finds that they frequently employed capitalist print strategies.

The conventional narrative of British socialist history describes how after the turn into the twentieth century the idealistic, spiritually charged larger socialism of the 1880s and 1890s gave way to a pragmatic movement intent on building a parliamentary labor party. William Morris scholar Anna Vaninskaya has usefully challenged this "two phases" narrative. However, Harris shows that there was indeed a change in Walt Whitman's place within the movement. After 1900, Whitman's poetry was much less cited within socialist discourse, and *Leaves of Grass* was gradually transformed into an aesthetic object rather than a source of political inspiration. *Walt Whitman and British Socialism* recreates a moment when Karl Marx's *Capital* seemed to many socialists less important than the poetry of his contemporary Walt Whitman.

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